

Luther's Legacy for Today

Anne Burghardt, Secretary for Ecumenical Relations, Lutheran World Federation

What is Luther's legacy for today? I suppose that during this year this question will be addressed rather frequently. At the same time, the answers given will probably vary quite a lot, depending on one's denominational background, theological and research interests, etc. Due to Luther's broad influence, it will not only be theologians who are trying to find answers to this question. It is also a question for historians, musicians, linguists, sociologists, politicians etc. If one wants to avoid merely naming different aspects of Luther's legacy—as this is all that could be done within the time given for this presentation—one inevitably needs to concentrate on a few topics only. I have decided to concentrate on two subjects: “The Gospel of Grace and Christian Freedom” and “Critical Discernment and the Relevance of education”.

1. The Gospel of Grace and Christian Freedom

1.1. God's grace as a gift

The red thread running through Luther's works from the beginning of the Reformation until his death in 1546 is the gospel of grace, which is closely linked to his understanding of Christian freedom. Throughout his life, Luther struggled with the question, “How do I find a gracious God?” Before his reformatory discovery, his main concern was what he needed to *do* in the midst of all the prescriptions, rules, rituals and moral commandments in order to become a good Christian and to have an appropriate relationship with God. Posing the question in this way indicates regarding freedom as a certain anthropological constant, a natural ability of human beings who are not only responsible for their success in everyday life but, eventually, also with regard to salvation. This understanding of human freedom seems to resonate well with the approach of the popular self-help books that promise to help us to achieve success, happiness and self-fulfillment (resp. to self-redemption) by correctly using our unlimited will.

In strict theological terms however, freedom is God's prerogative and human freedom is therefore not the human being's own capability or attribute but the unconditional gift of the gospel. It is God's proclamation of love to human beings. In the Heidelberg disputation, Luther

states that this “love of God does not find, but creates that which is pleasing to it.”¹ This means that God’s unconditional love and grace justify the sinner who receives this gift by faith, not through deeds. Human beings are God’s beloved children not because of who *they* are and what *they* do but because of who *God* is and what *God* does. In the foreword to Latin edition of his works, Luther describes how he came to understand the meaning of God’s righteousness, a notion that, in his own words, he had “hated so much”. This happened after he had meditated on Romans 1:17 (“For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, ‘The one who is righteous will live by faith’ ”). Luther says:

I meditated night and day on those words until at last, by the mercy of God, I paid attention to their context: “The justice of God is revealed in it, as it is written: ‘The just person lives by faith.’” I began to understand that in this verse the justice of God is that by which the just person lives by a gift of God, that is by faith. I began to understand that this verse means that the justice of God is revealed through the Gospel, but it is a passive justice, i.e. that by which the merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written: “The just person lives by faith.” All at once I felt that I was born again and entered into paradise itself through open gates. Immediately I saw the whole of Scripture in a different light.²

This core insight had a far reaching impact on many fields, not only theological and spiritual. By recognizing the central importance of God’s unconditional love for human beings, Luther anticipated the relevance of unconditional parental love centuries before modern psychology came to talk about the importance of parents’ unconditional love for their children’s development.

1.2.Freed to serve the neighbor

According to Luther, true Christian freedom can therefore only be a gift from God, not anything we possess. It does not depend on our own deeds. but only on our faith in Jesus Christ. Luther and Lutheranism in general have often been accused of undermining the relevance of good deeds: if human good works or merits are worthless in the sight of God and, – to put it bluntly, have no influence whether we are destined for heaven or fated for hell, what then is the point of being and doing good? Luther responds to this accusation in his “Treatise on a Freedom of a

¹ Heidelberg Disputation, 28.thesis.

² Martin Luther, „Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther’s Latin Writings, 154“, *Luther’s Works*, vol. 34 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957), 337.

Christian,” in which he makes effective use of his love for dialectics. Here Luther juxtaposes his two famous sentences: “A Christian is a free lord of all, and subject to none” and “A Christian is the most dutiful servant of all and subject to everyone”³. Through God’s liberating grace human beings are made truly free and through being freed from being “*incurvatus in se ipse*”, turned into themselves, they are free to turn their eyes from themselves to God and their neighbor. Luther believed that that good works come naturally to the Christian and are an expression of love and gratitude for God’s saving and loving grace. Diarmaid MacCulloch, an Anglican church historian, has somewhat ironically said that, “Luther was showing the idealism of a celibate here: the complex experience of marriage was yet to come for him.”⁴ At the same time, MacCulloch recognizes that Luther affirmed a sound psychological truth: relationships of love are not played by rules.⁵ Luther never understood freedom as being arbitrary; for him it was always a responsible freedom.

Luther’s understanding of vocation which, grew out of his understanding of Christian freedom and the priesthood of all believers, has had a clear impact on societies with a strong Lutheran heritage. The simultaneous relation to God and to one’s neighbor brought with itself a positive evaluation of ordinary work both in- and outside the home. According to Luther, honest and faithful work is true service, “everyday worship of God” as he calls it. In Luther’s words, a Christian should work “without thought of gain,”⁶ “without hope for reward,”⁷ considering nothing except the need of the neighbor. This ethic, as idealistic as it may sound, was reinforced by the institutional framework of the Lutheran state churches, established after the Reformation, and decisively contributed to the origins of the welfare state in Germany and in the Nordic countries.

God’s grace as a gift and freedom to serve the neighbor: the relevance of this legacy today

³ Martin Luther, “The Freedom of A Christian, 1520” in Helmut. T. Lehmann, *Luther’s Works*, vol. 31 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957), 344.

⁴ Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Reformation. Europe’s House Divided 1490-1700*, 2004, 131.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Martin Luther, “The Freedom of a Christian,” 359.

⁷ Ibid., 365.

- Time and again, the relevance of the Lutheran doctrine of justification through faith by grace alone has been questioned since most people today are no longer asking for a gracious God. In fact, the question that many people have today, is, How do I find a gracious neighbor? Human beings continue to yearn for the recognition of their dignity, for love and compassion. Many experience pressure, both at home and at work, as they try to meet everybody's expectations. Others fear that they might be regarded as "unproductive" by society due to their age, an illness, or certain weaknesses. At the same time, the concept of "mercy" seems to have become unattractive. Gottfried Brakemeier, a former president of the LWF, noted: "The concept of "mercy" is unattractive because it sounds hierarchical. It would seem to establish dependencies. There remains a gap between giver and taker, between them ("up there") and us ("down here"), with the former always setting the tone as benefactors and patrons."⁸ Therefore, grabbing a self-help book that is expected to guide us self-fulfillment and happiness is more in accordance with today's zeitgeist. Believing that one achieves everything by one's own effort leaves no place for gratitude and compassion. Contrary to this, Luther believes gratefulness and the living out of God's grace to be the very basis of our existence and freedom, enabling us to be merciful and compassionate. Therefore, although the question, How Do I Find a Gracious God? might no longer be relevant for many people today, the response, based on the doctrine of justification, continues to be of significance. "We do not need to find this God – we already have this God". This God helps us to free ourselves from the belief that our dignity is derived from our ability to meet the standards set by the societies in which we live; this God helps us realistically to see our human condition, which enables us to be more merciful with our neighbors. In other words, this God helps us to get our priorities right.
- Everyday life, including our professional life, has become far more complex than it was in Luther's times. The question who exactly is my neighbor to whom I relate is far more complicated than it used to be a few centuries ago. Employees in transnational corporations in the global North often need to fulfill tasks that contribute to the

⁸ Gottfried Brakemeier, "Liberated by God's Grace – From What, To What?" in: *Liberated by God's Grace*, LWF 2015, 14.

exploitation of those who are employed for the same corporation in the global South. Fulfilling their professional tasks does therefore not necessarily mean working in accordance with Lutheran work ethics. Lutheran ethics of vocation can nevertheless keep us conceiving work merely as a means to meet the ends or a way to earn as much as possible. It reminds us that work should be seen from the perspectives of serving God and our neighbor, and promoting justice and well-being. However, one word of caution needs to be spoken. If the “freedom of a Christian” is translated into the selfless fulfillment of duties only, it can also get lost in that context. Justification must not be reduced to a mere initial step toward action (freed only to serve) as the liberating gospel could then again become a restrictive law.⁹ Passion for work should not become an end in itself.

2. Critical discernment and the relevance of education

2.1. Luther’s hermeneutical principles as a way to critical discernment

Luther’s theological convictions were based on his profound and intense engagement with the Scripture. *Sola Scriptura* – one of the four *solae* that belong to the basic principles of Lutheran theology – indicates the central role of the Scripture for the Reformation. While Luther’s biblical interpretation may at times appear biblicist and some traditions within Lutheranism, such as the Missouri synod, tend to favor a rather literal reading of the Scripture, Luther did develop certain important hermeneutical rules that paved the way for historical criticism and a contextual reading of the Bible.

The main hermeneutical rule applied by Luther has its origin in the doctrine of justification as the core of the gospel. The interpretation of the manifold texts of the Bible, then, must derive from and be based on this core insight. According to Luther, the real meaning of the Bible in any of its parts is “what inculcates¹⁰ Christ.”¹¹ Luther was evidently willing to criticize parts of the

⁹ Bernd Oberdorfer, “How Do I Find a Gracious God?” in *Salvation – Not for Sale*, Lutheran World Federation, 2015, 11.

¹⁰ In German “treibet”: *bears*.

¹¹ Martin Luther, “Preface to the Three Epistles of St. John, 1546 (1522)”, *Luther’s Works*, vol. 35 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960), 396.

Scripture in light of other parts, which he identified as displaying the core message of the Scripture.¹² For instance, he changed the order in the New Testament by moving the Letter to the Hebrews and the Letter of James – both of which he found theologically problematic – to the end of the Bible, together with the Apocalypse. For Luther, the gospel was a “living voice” that reaches believers across time in the authentic form of oral proclamation. Therefore, the written word of the Bible first needs to become the Word of God.

According to Luther, another basic hermeneutical principle is the distinction between Law and gospel – another classical example of Lutheran dialectic. It is important to see that this distinction is not equivalent to the distinction between the Old and New Testaments. Luther did not claim that the Old Testament was the Law and the New Testament the gospel. There is gospel in the Old Testament and Law in the New Testament. Luther recognized that the same text can function as Law or as gospel, depending on whether the reader receives it as demanding or as promising. Yet, the core message of the Bible is the gospel of God’s liberating grace. How a legal text is to be dealt with can therefore only be decided in relation to the gospel.¹³

Luther believed in the principle of autopisty, or the self-authentication of the Holy Scripture, which stipulates that Holy Scripture has no other guarantors of its own authority than itself. In Luther’s view, Holy Scripture derives its authority by dint of its content, which can be summarized in Jesus Christ.¹⁴

Lutheran theologians have always emphasized the challenge of reading and interpreting the Bible. The notion of the autopisty of Holy Scripture does not mean that “anything goes.” The Reformers always insisted that it is crucial that people are educated and trained to understand the Bible. It is not by accident that research on biblical exegesis has been cultivated and further developed in the mainline Protestant churches, in particular the Lutheran churches and that education for all and the development of the vernacular gained special relevance in this context.

¹² *The Bible in the Life of the Lutheran Communion. A Study Document on Lutheran Hermeneutics*, Lutheran World Federation, 2016, 16.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Hans-Peter Grosshans, “The Liberating Word of God. Reflections on the Lutheran Understanding of Holy Scripture,” in *Liberated by God’s Grace*, Lutheran World Federation, 2015, 46.

2.2. Relevance of education and development of the vernacular

Inevitably, the aspiration of the Reformers to make Scripture accessible to everyone demanded general education be made available for all. Luther's vision that all people have the right to elementary education, regardless of their social background and gender, was rooted in his baptismal theology and his understanding of the priesthood of all believers. In his famous treatise "To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation, he notes:"[A]ll Christians are truly of the spiritual estate, and there is no difference among them except that of office. Paul says in I Corinthians 12 [:12-13] that we are all one body, yet every member has its own work by which it serves the others. This is because we all have one baptism, gospel, and faith alone make us spiritual and a Christian people."¹⁵ Luther continues: "[We] are all consecrated priests through baptism [...] That is why in cases of necessity anyone can baptize and give absolution. This would be impossible if we were not all priests"¹⁶, and "Even Christ said in John 6 [:45] that all Christians shall be taught by God."¹⁷ He also specifically pleaded that "every town had a girls' school as well, where the girls would be taught the gospel for an hour every day either in German or in Latin."¹⁸

Luther pleaded for both: education in the Christian faith and general education for all so that they could develop skills and the competence that equip them for their civil and professional lives. In the Large Catechism, Luther states, "If we want capable and qualified people for both the civil and the spiritual realms, we really must spare no effort, time, and expense in teaching and educating our children to serve God and the world."¹⁹ Interestingly, this fervent plea comes at the end of the explanation of the fourth commandment ("You are to honor your father and your

¹⁵ Martin Luther, "To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate", in *Luther's Works*, vol. 44, 127.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, lk 87–88.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 134.

¹⁸ Martin Luther, "To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate (1520)", 206.

¹⁹ Martin Luther, "The Large Catechism (1529)", in: *The Book of Concord. The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, 410.

mother”). For Luther, this commandment was not only about what children owe to their parents, but also about what parents owe their children.

In his treatise “To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany that they Establish and Maintain Christian Schools” of 1524 Luther explains that the secular government must be responsible for keeping the schools: “It is a grave and important matter, and one which is of vital concern both to Christ and the world at large, that we take steps to help the youth. . . . My dear sirs, if we have to spend such large sums every year on guns, temporal peace and prosperity of a city, why should not much more be devoted to the poor neglected youth – at least enough to engage one or two competent people to teach school?”²⁰ Particularly in his “Sermon On Keeping Children in School” Luther argues against the pragmatism of parents who take their children out of school and “turning them to the making of a living and to caring for their bellies.”²¹ For Luther, the aim of education should not be to “care for one’s belly” – the aim of education must be caring for children’s souls and ultimately for their salvation. Throughout the letter, Luther opposes education for the pursuit of Mammon. For him, the relevance of education was closely connected to both serving God and the neighbor.

Luther’s translation of the Bible was a milestone in the development of early modern German. But what is more, many other European languages owe their current existence largely to Luther’s belief that the Word of God needs to be accessible in one’s mother tongue. Students from all over Europe, mainly from northern, central and eastern Europe, who were matriculated at Leucorea, the University of Wittenberg, spread Luther’s ideas to many parts of Europe and prepared the way for local reformations. When talking about the impact of the Lutheran Reformation, one is most familiar with examples from the Nordic countries and Germany. Particularly in regard to education and the vernacular, it is also good to remind ourselves of the impulses that the Lutheran Reformation gave in other regions, especially in central and north-eastern Europe.

Lutheran catechisms and parts of the Bible that were translated into many European languages at the time of the Reformation, were milestones in the development of languages such as Finnish,

²⁰ Martin Luther, “To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany that they Establish and Maintain Christian Schools” (1524), *Luther’s Works*, vol. 45, 350.

²¹ Martin Luther, “A Sermon on Keeping Children in School”, *Luther’s Works*, vol. 46, 219.

Icelandic, Estonian, Lithuanian, Slovenian and many others. For instance, in Slovenia, where the Reformation was largely eclipsed by the Counter Reformation, Primož Trubar (1508–1586), is depicted on the Slovenian 1 Euro. Trubar published the first book in Slovenian—a Lutheran catechism.

A good example of the impact of the Lutheran emphasis on education and the recognition of the importance of the vernacular can be brought from Estonia. While Estonia was under Swedish rule (Northern Estonia since 1561 and Southern Estonia since 1625 until the end of the Nordic War in 1721), efforts were undertaken by the Swedish governors to establish an elementary school system for peasants' children. This was frequently opposed by the Baltic German landlords. In 1632, the University of Tartu (Dorpat) was founded in Estonia by the Swedish king Gustav II Adolph. This university later played a vital role in educating the first generation of Estonian and Latvian intellectuals and academics who laid the foundation for establishing independent statehoods. Towards the end of the seventeenth century, Lutheran pastors were instructed to make sure that if a couple wanted to get married, the bride had to be able to read – how would she otherwise be able to teach her children the catechism? After Estonia was incorporated into the Russian empire in 1721, the Baltic Lutheran pastors continued to cultivate the local languages (i.e., Estonian and Latvian) and to promote literacy among peasants, who had been forced to become serfs, until the beginning of the nineteenth century. The statistics are revealing: during the 1897 census in the Russian empire, the literacy rate among Estonians aged ten or older (regardless of gender) was 96–97 percent. This made the northern Baltic the most literate region of the Russian empire (the average literacy level outside the Baltic provinces was approx. 30 percent).²² Among Estonians, education (promoted by the Lutheran church) was regarded as having an almost salvific dimension; on the one hand because it was one of the few ways of rising above the status of a simple farmworker or maid, but also because it provided the tools for searching one's own mind for the very Lutheran concepts of “truth and justice” – to quote the title of the seminal novel by the Estonian writer Anton Hansen Tammsaare²³ (1879–1940). Despite the fact that today Estonia is one of the most secularized countries in the world,

²² Toivo Raun, *Estonia and the Estonians*, Stanford, 2001, 79.

²³ A. H. Tammsaare, *Truth and Justice. Andres and Pearu*, trans. by Inna Feldbach and Alan Peter Trei, Haute Culture Books, Stockholm, 2014

education continues to be regarded as being extremely relevant. During the last PISA test, Estonia scored among the best in Europe and worldwide.

Luther's hermeneutical principles and the importance of education and the vernacular: the relevance of this legacy today

- Luther's hermeneutical heritage opened the way to understanding that instead of emphasizing the biblical text as God's Word, the emphasis needs to lie on the Word of God as it is revealed through proclamation. It is therefore crucial that every generation asks anew how the Scripture becomes the living voice of the gospel and how God's liberating power can be experienced through it. Luther's main hermeneutical principle – "what bears Christ" – or, in other word, grace-centeredness, is as relevant today as it was at the time of the Reformation. It has often been argued that the Lutheran way of reading the Bible can engender arbitrariness. According to Luther's understanding, the basic principle for evaluating the life of the church is the question, Does the church's life serve the proclamation of God's grace? This question safeguards that the Scripture is not seen as a code of law and prevents the church from falling into legalism. At the same time, it needs to be kept in mind that this principle is not meant to be an instrument for cheap grace or individual(istic) interpretations but requires joint reading of the Scripture. Contextual readings have brought many new insights into how we understand Scripture. Today these readings need to be brought together in a trans-contextual reading of the Bible that is based on diversity, while expressing unity in Christ.
- In light of rising populism and post-truth politics the dialectic principle that is characteristic to Lutheran theology may be helpful not only in theological discussions but also in a wider context. Dialectic is about bringing opposites together: Law and gospel; hidden God (*Deus absconditus*) and revealed God (*Deus revelatus*); *simul iustus et peccator*, etc. It is about bringing together two statements that seem to contradict each other, but that need to be said together in order to reflect the whole truth. To underline only one part of a dialectic distorts the truth. Faith is full of dialectics but so is life. Dialectics might therefore prevent us from falling into the trap of believing one-sided and non-critical statements and views.

- Luther's harsh words against parents who prefer to take their children away from school so that they can "take better care for their bellies" remind us to be cautious of the prevalent pragmatism in the educational system. A pragmatically oriented education system certainly has its advantages such as the emphasis on experience; using teaching methods that are based on learning by doing; improving cooperative skills, etc. Nevertheless, the ultimate goal of a purely pragmatically oriented education system is merely to train an "effective" human being who will contribute to the (material) growth of the society. Education is being instrumentalized for precisely this purpose. Since according to the pragmatic approach there are no pre-determined aims of education, and everything is constantly in an experimental phase, all educational plans and efforts may simply go astray and achieve little as there are no pre-determined ideas or proper vision towards which one would like to move. Pragmatism does not lay down any aims and ideals to be pursued by human beings.

From pragmatic point of view, it makes a lot of sense to close down fields of study that are not particularly profitable – if they do not have a market value, they should not be supported. From pragmatic point of view, it also makes a lot of sense to decrease the number of fields that are taught in national languages at universities around Europe and to move towards monolingual approach. But would we thereby not make the world much poorer? Should we not based on Luther's ideas, try to swim against the stream?

Short conclusion still missing